

# Blackwork and Plaited Braid Caul

(Division II: Counted Thread)

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## Introduction

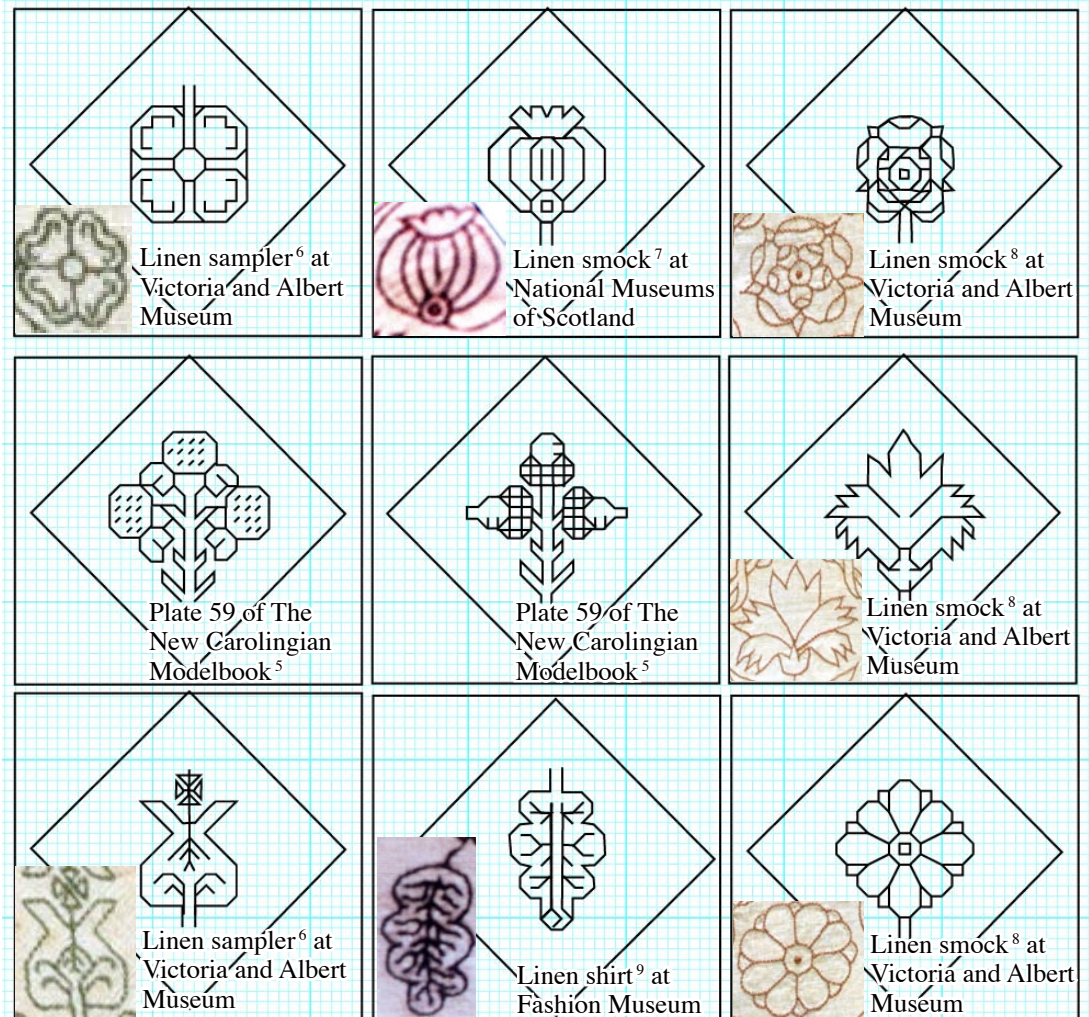
Linen coifs and cauls were *de rigueur* attire for most women in 16th century Western Europe <sup>1</sup>. I had already created several simple linen cauls, but wished for a more sophisticated, decorative head covering. I studied high-resolution images of extant headwear from the 16th century in the Victoria and Albert Museum <sup>2,3,4</sup>, and found that coifs and cauls were elaborately embroidered, employing blackwork and plaited braid stitches. I compared these extant examples with different types of stitches, various threads, and different fabric thread counts, and as a result, I chose to use the backstitch and Holbein stitch in green silk thread, as well as the plaited braid stitch in gold DMC metallic thread, on 32-count linen. All of my blackwork fill patterns are based on historical sources found in the Victoria and Albert Museum, photos of extant pieces in *Patterns of Fashion 4* by Janet Arnold, and historically-based patterns in *The New Carolingian Modelbook* <sup>5</sup>.



Coif, (V&A, T.27-1975)

## The Blackwork Fills

I charted all but two of the nine different fills myself by closely studying the original embroidered element. All fills are floral, which was a very common element in 16th century embroidery, as evidenced by my study of extant pieces <sup>5-9</sup>. Here you can see my charted fills, along with an image of the original 16th century embroidery (when available) and a citation to the image of it.



# The Pattern

The pattern is an original designed by myself, but the overall “feel” is inspired by an extant 16th c. smock<sup>8</sup>. Of particular note is the lattice shape sections filled with the floral designs. I also charted three of the flowers that appear on this smock for use on my caul. I feel confident that the pattern I devised is, while original, at least period appropriate based on the stitches, motifs, and overall design.



early pattern test

In regards to density of stitches, I considered adding a knot pattern around the floral fill patterns, like shown to the left. However, I decided that it was busier and denser than the extant patterns I’ve seen, where there is one thematic motif and one connecting motif, not two. So I unpicked the knot pattern and proceeded without it.

I should also note that the gold thread in the connecting stitches was inspired by an extant coif<sup>2</sup>, which uses silver-gilt thread in a similar fashion as in my hat.



16th c. linen smock<sup>8</sup>



16th c. linen coif<sup>2</sup>

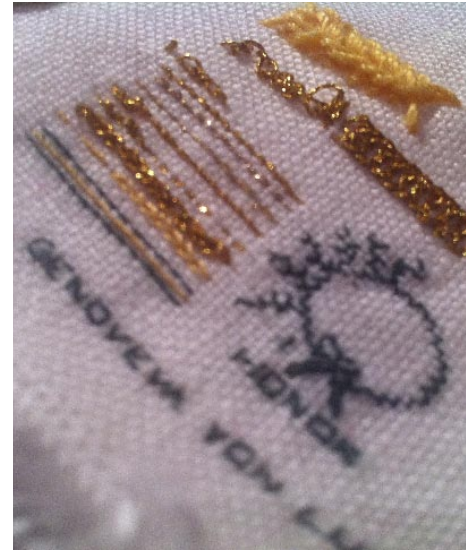


My full pattern with 30 floral motifs and 12 latticed lines

# The Materials

**Fabric**—A very fine quality linen was primarily used for embroidered coifs and cauls in the 16th century<sup>2-4</sup>. Most linen available today comes in thread counts ranging from 18 to 32 threads per inch. In preparing for this project, I purchased a variety of evenweave linens and stitched some sample motifs onto them. I felt that a 32-count evenweave linen looked the closest to the extant examples I studied. My research indicates that a higher-thread count linen would likely have been used historically (one coif<sup>2</sup> at the Victoria & Albert Museum has a thread count of 104 threads per inch!), and while I was able to find a 50-count thread linen, it was about \$100/yard. I settled on a Belgian linen at approximately \$40/yard.

**Thread**—All of the surviving coifs in the Victoria and Albert Museum were stitched with silk thread in certain colors (black, green, blue, red, and pink) or with silver-gilt metallic thread. I purchased several different silk threads and stitched samples. I found little substantial difference between the readily available Guttermann silk threads and the pricier, mail-order silks, so I went with a dark green Guttermann silk thread for the floral motifs. The metallic thread proved more difficult, and I tried out at least 7 different metallic threads, from inexpensive polyester/rayon threads to pricier foil-wrapped-silk threads. In the end, the thread I felt matched the extant examples of the braided stitch was a simple DMC metallic thread—it was more pliable and conformed to the braid in a more natural manner than other metallic threads. Historically, a “silver-gilt” thread would have been used, which typically consisted of metal strips wound around a silk core<sup>9</sup>. The DMC metallic thread, upon close inspection, is a gold-metallic foil wrapped around a thread core, so it makes sense that it works well in this application.



A portion of my personal sampler showing various gold thread examples

**Needle**—I used a #24 tapestry needle which has a blunt end to avoid piercing threads as I stitched. While I used a modern 18k gold plated needle, I do not feel it different significantly from the sort of needle that would have been used in the 16th century by an embroideress who were using bronze<sup>10</sup> or wire needles at this point.

**Wax**—I coated all of my silk threads with beeswax before stitching, both to strengthen and lubricate the threads and to help them bond to other threads when they are woven under before being clipping off.

# The Methods

Blackwork can either counted or non-counted, and I chose to go with the counted technique both for personal preference and for the security and uniformity that counting provides. Knowing that such an embroidered caul would historically have been created by a very skilled person, I paid careful attention to accuracy (to my knowledge, there are no errors in the counting of my lattice-work, for example), neatness (any mistakes were unpicked and re-stitched), tension, and uniformity. I did not, however, attempt to make my design reversible—most 16th c. blackwork designs are not reversible and, when they were, they occurred on pieces which would be viewed from both sides (which mind would not). I used a variety of stitches in my work (see Stitches later in this documentation), which I carefully researched in advance and practiced in earlier works before starting this project.

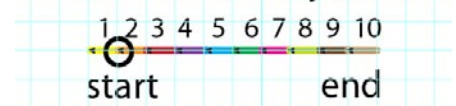
# The Stitches

My caul was created with four different stitches, which were all employed during the 16th century. Unlike some other embroidery techniques, blackwork uses only a couple of simple stitches.

## The Back Stitch

The back stitch is a very old stitch. To start, push your needle up from the back of the fabric. Push the needle into your fabric to make one stitch backward along your pattern. Push the needle through the fabric in front of the first stitch (one thread away in Aida, two threads away in linen) and still on the line. Pull the thread through the fabric. Make the second stitch backward, bringing the needle out in front of the second stitch and still on the pattern line. Repeat this along your pattern. The back stitch was used for most of the motifs.

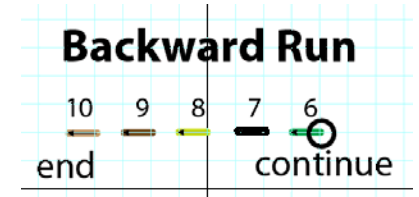
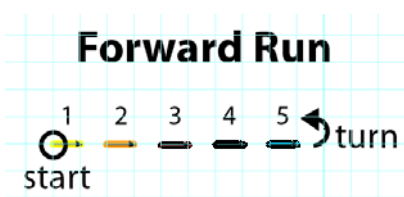
### Forward (Only) Run



## The Double-Running (“Holbein”) Stitch

The double-running, or Holbein, stitch is the basic stitch of blackwork embroidery.

This stitch is reversible—it looks the same on the back and the front. It requires a forward run where you generally skip every other stitch, and a backward run where you fill in the skipped stitches, to complete, as shown here. The Holbein stitch was used to create the lattice outlines.



## The Running Stitch

This stitch corresponds to just the forward run shown above in the Double-Running stitch. A running stitch was used in the strawberry motif, as well as in the stitching of the caul’s headband.

## The Double Plaited Braid Stitch

While doing the research on my blackwork fills, I came across a number of extant pieces that used an elaborate stitch in silver-gilt thread, such as the 16th c. coif<sup>2</sup> in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was necessary to research and practice this stitch for several weeks before I perfected the correct technique and look. No books that I found contained instructions on how to perform this stitch, and many experienced embroiderers consider it to be the most difficult stitch. Because so little documentation existed on it, I created a step-by-step tutorial and published it at my web site and distribute it at events where I display my work (see attached tutorial).



# The Caul

I chose to make a caul rather than a coif because that is the type of headcovering worn more frequently by the 16th c. clothing styles I enjoy, such as German and Flemish. An elaborately embroidered example can be seen in this portrait of Judith by Lucas Cranach the Elder<sup>11</sup>. My caul is made completely of linen and hand-stitched with white silk thread. A white grossgrain ribbon is encased inside the band to allow for adjustment with different hair styles. A caul generally sits a bit back on the head, as shown in the photo of the caul on my head.



Wearing my beautiful caul



The completed piece

# The Caul in History

Cauls were worn by woman of all classes in the 16th century, from Germany to Flanders to Britain. A caul decorated in gold, however, would only be worn by a middle or upper class woman, as shown in this wide sampling of portraits:



Detail of Judith with the Head of Holofernes<sup>12</sup>



Detail of The Beheading of St. John the Baptist<sup>13</sup>



Detail of Portrait of a Young Woman<sup>14</sup>



Detail of The Ill-Matched Couple<sup>15</sup>



Details of Unknown Girl<sup>16</sup>



Portrait of Unknown Lady<sup>17</sup>



# Summary

**What is it?** A blackwork and plaited braid caul worked in a floral motif.

**Who would have worn it?** Women of middle- to upper-classes during the middle to end of the 16th century.

**How was it made?** The pattern was adapted from extant examples, with all floral motifs being charted from extant pieces with the same or similar motifs. Materials used in this project include 32-count linen, silk thread, and gold metallic thread. Four stitches (double running stitch, back stitch, running stitch, and plaited braid stitch) were employed.

**What is blackwork?** Blackwork embroidery, at its most basic, is black embroidery on white fabric. Yet it really isn't so "black and white." Other colors of threads were historically used in addition to black, typically green, blue, or red. Much blackwork is composed of geometric, counted stitches, but it can also be free-form. Some blackwork can be reversible, but not always. Four common characteristics I've observed on blackwork embroidery are:

1. small, straight stitches;
2. an intricacy of design;
3. a repeating motif; and
4. a contrast between the stitched threads and the ground fabric.

**What is the history of blackwork?** Blackwork's popularity in the 16th century is attributed to Catherine of Aragon, who came from Spain in 1501 to wed Prince Arthur—her wedding contained several articles of black-on-white embroidery. It is said that Catherine embroidered these items herself, having been taught by her mother Queen Isabella, who in turn always made her husband's shirts. For this reason blackwork is also referred to as "Spanish work." Blackwork remained fashionable for more than 100 years, falling out of favor only in the 17th century. Yet, the simple stitches that make up blackwork had been around since at least the 10th century, so it's theorized that Queen Catherine popularized a particular style of blackwork rather than introduced it. Blackwork is even referred to in *The Canterbury Tales* (1390-1400) in this passage: "what was her smock and embroidered all in front and behind on her collar of coal-black silk, both in and out." Extant pieces with blackwork embroidery have survived from the 16th century, but our richest resource for blackwork designs are portraits, most notably those by Hans Holbein.

**What have I learned from this project?** First and foremost, I have gained a tremendous appreciation for the time and patience required for needlework. This project took me several months, and I estimate it required about 100 hours to complete. Yet I did not experience tedium; instead, I felt a quiet serenity and orderliness of thought develop within me as I worked on this project. In fact, as I stitched, I felt an almost direct connection to other women who picked up the needle over 400 years ago. There is a simplicity to this that really made me feel like I'd taken a step back in time.

On a more practical level, I found that material costs were quite low, as only a small amount of linen was necessary. Next time I will invest in an even better linen with a higher thread count. Additionally, since completing this project, I have learned better methods of weaving in my "tails" left behind by completed runs, and I believe that I can make the back of my piece look neater using these methods.

Since completing this project, I have created another step-by-step tutorial publication for blackwork (see attached) and use it to teach my class on blackwork. Both of my tutorial publications are available online in PDF format at my web site located at <http://HonorBeforeVictory.com>

# References

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13. Cranach, Lucas. The Beheading of St. John the Baptist. 1515. Archbishop's Schloß, Kroměříž.
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